

# Ideas Count

By MERRILL A. McPEAK



DOD photo

Jordanian and  
U.S. aircraft.

Welcome to *Joint Force Quarterly*. I look forward to thinking about the ideas that will appear in these pages.

Ideas count. Someone once said that the Cold War was a contest of ideas, and in the end the idea of freedom won out. Armed conflicts are also often contests between ideas, between concepts of what will and will not work on the battlefield. The most memorable victories have featured the introduction, on one side or the other, of a new, better, winning idea.

Of course, we all understand that ideas alone are not enough. Early armored vehi-

cles offered both sides a potential war winner in World War I, but many of the best minds in Europe gave their time not to imagining how the internal combustion engine could be combined with a gun and armor plating, but to developing gas masks for horses. So, ideas must be iterated, argued, discussed, debated, experimented with, and finally put into practice.

We have sometimes been lucky in this regard. In the 1930s George Marshall chose to spend precious Army dollars on professional military education. Shortchanging other "must have" requirements, he kept the schools at Leavenworth and Maxwell alive and so laid the intellectual foundations for victory in World War II. It is in this spirit that I invite all comers to sharpen their pencils and their thoughts, and to use this journal to

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propose, develop, and debate military concepts, the inventory of ideas the Nation must have to win in the next century.

As we do this, let me suggest some discussion topics that seem to deserve special attention. The first involves the concept of

divestiture. We all understand that we are going through a period in which we must stop doing some things. We ought to be asking ourselves, what are

the core activities of the Armed Forces? What *must* we keep doing?

For instance, we might ask why we are in some businesses that more naturally seem to be civilian enterprises. Some of our activities are vestiges of an earlier time when no competent civilian alternative existed. I am thinking here of things like the CONUS commissary system or much of the domestic activity of the Corps of Engineers. Until recently, the Air Force ran a small contract cargo airline called LOGAIR. We started it in 1952 as a way to move time-critical parts among Air Force bases. It may have been a good idea at the time, but it lingered on long after its economic justification disappeared. Last year, we did away with LOGAIR. We now use commercial air courier services to do the same job. Performance has improved, costs are way down, and to those who worry about our ability to surge when needed, I suggest a look at how these same companies perform during the Christmas season.

There are surely many activities we can divest and at the same time improve performance. Some of us are now involved in a dialogue about how to drawdown the Nation's excess aviation depot repair capacity. Maybe the right question is whether we need government operated aviation depots (or government operated shipyards) at all. And what about, say, military communications systems? In other words, I would like to see a lot more discussion about whether and where we could rely on the civilian sector to a much greater extent to perform support functions now done in-house. One advantage of such an approach would be to free us to concentrate on the more strictly military aspects of our profession. That's our niche. Perhaps like many of the (mostly failed) in-

dustrial conglomerates, we need to shed the parts of our enterprise that have taken us away from our core business—warfighting. We need, like successful businesses, to “stick to our knitting.”

A second fruitful area for discussion is the division of labor within DOD, between the services and other elements of the department. In this regard, a recent trend has been to centralize common support activities under defense agencies. These agencies and associated field activities have become one of our very few growth sectors. They employ close to 200,000 people; together they are bigger than the Marine Corps. In prospect, the centralized approach always promises economies of scale. In retrospect, the economies almost always evaporate and we pay a high price when people lose a sense of mission identification.

In the Air Force, one of our quality thrusts has been in the exact opposite direction. We have been working hard to decentralize, to push power down, to give our people a stake in the outcome. This has worked well for us and I suggest it is time to review the bidding on the growth of defense agencies.

However, the system we now use to acquire new weapons may need more rather than less centralization. Some adjustment seems to be needed; no one I know argues that the system is working well now. For me, an important question is what acquisition functions must the services control and what functions might they give up. For what it is



DOD photo

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worth, my view is that the services should own both the *beginning* and the *end* of the acquisition process. At the beginning the services must define military requirements, and at the end they must control the operational test and evaluation process that determines whether requirements have been met. But much of what goes on in between could be managed differently than it is today, with the services giving up much of the clout they now enjoy. Anyone resisting change in the acquisition process must explain why we often spend lots of money and lots of time on programs that do not field operationally significant amounts of usable hardware.

Finally, I would welcome more discussion of the division of roles and functions among the services. The Chairman recently completed a review of this sensitive subject, but I'm convinced that smaller defense budgets will soon force us back to the table for another look at the question of unnecessary duplication of capabilities. I am not referring here to the possession by the services of complementary capabilities, but to true overlap or illogical arrangement of air and space re-



DOD photo

General McPeak  
visiting the field.

lated combat capabilities. I believe, for example, that the Air Force should consolidate all U.S. military operations in space. It is also my view that the Air Force should own and operate integrated theater air and ballistic missile defenses. These are tough questions, about which honest people can disagree, but it is clear to me that what once appeared to be laudable redundancy will be seen more and more to be needless duplication as the budget heads south.

Some say that the roles and missions debate comes down to an issue of trust. I do not believe that is entirely, or even mostly, true. In the Goldwater-Nichols era the unified CINCs exercise the full range of command prerogatives—what we call “combatant command.” So the system used for force employment need not rely on trust alone. Still, there is something in the concern about trust, a nagging element of doubt (“If I don’t control it myself, will the other guy be there when I need him?”) that applies as much to theater missile defense or space support as it does to search and rescue or close air support. Thorough and rigorous debate in the pages of this journal can go a long way toward getting our thinking straight—and building the spirit of trust we will need for the future.

These are the kinds of questions I would ask.

Ideas do count. I welcome the arrival of this journal as a way to share ideas that will produce a better understanding of ourselves, our profession, and our path to future victory.

JFQ